THE INCONSPICUOUS KINGDOM
Communion Meditation
Luke 13:18-22

JMB
BSPC
Cols, OH

3/4/79

The year was 1968. Martin Luther King had been assassinated. We didn't know what would happen next, but whatever it was we were sure it wouldn't be good. I had an appointment the next day with a young couple to discuss the baptism of their child. In the middle of it the conversation took an all too familiar turn: "he got what he was asking for: he was a trouble maker: when are they going to learn to stay in their place?" I left their home depressed, afraid for my children for the future of my nation. In fact I was so caught up in the tragedy of the whole thing that I sat in my car at the curb for a while before driving away. When I started the engine and pulled into the street I had to drive at a snail's pace behind two bicycles - each with two little boys - in front of me, weaving, tilting, arms and legs protruding crazily, laughing. Finally they pulled over so I could pass and I saw one white peddler and one black passenger on the first bike: one black peddler and one white passenger on the second bike, about ten years old. And I have had in my mind ever since, a picture which comes automatically into focus every time I hear words Jesus once said: "The kingdom of God is like a grain of mustard seed - it is like leaven."

I had learned in the classroom about the Kingdom of God breaking in whenever his will is done: whenever God is Sovereign - in human behavior. That incident was the first time I thought I saw the idea in life. Since then I have kept a collection of mustard seeds — incidents in which the Kingdom of God, Jesus talked about seems to be present.

Every time I see a little of people in the hall of the church - waiting for a little food - a little evidence that what they live or die matters to someone - I think about God's inconspicuous Kingdom

Into my collection also goes an incident at my own dinner table. A bicycle had been stolen from our garage: in fact it was the second bicycle we have lost in that fashion, this one, however a joint purchase between father and son. He had cut a lot of lawns to earn his half. I was in rare form: self righteous, indignant, angry, hostile, and he said, spontaneously, "It's hard to understand how someone could want something bad enough to do that." The Kingdom of God is like a grain of mustard seed - it is like leaven."

This week I received two letters to add to my catalogue of mustard seeds and leaven.

The first is from Dr. Walter Hull, Medical Missionary of the Southern Presbyterian Church in Zaire, brother-in-law of a member of this congregation. Walter and Nancy and their daughters Leanne and Maria worshipped with us last year for a while. Broad Street Presbyterian Church made a modest financial commitment to Walter's work recently. His Christmas letter arrived last week - listen to some excerpts -

"Last August, our family returned to a Zaire which continues to totter on the brink of total economic disaster...Yesterday morning as I left for my Monday clinic eight miles away in the city of Kananga, I was requested to take home the body of the twelve year old son of the chaplain of the nearby military camp. The child had died in the hospital during

the night of rheumatic heart ailment. As my land-rover bounced over holes and through sandpits, I was caught up short listening to the child's father singing hymns in a language I did not understand - I was struck by the ravages of disease that takes so many lives here (30% of children under five years of age), and yet the expression of a profound, and anchoring faith of so many Zairian Christians.

"Food remains the item of principle concern for most Zairians. We are appalled at Time Magazine's pictures of Iowa farmers dumping corn in streets - at a price of $3.00 or $4.00 a sack. Going prices here are $50-$75 a sack."

And then the final paragraph: "This Christmas we can proclaim with all Christians that 'In Him was life: And the Life is the Light of men. The light shineth in darkness: and the darkness has not quenched it." The Kingdom of God is like a grain of mustard seed - it is like leaven.

The same day, a newsletter arrived from Corrymeela Community, Ballycastle, Northern Ireland; an ecumenical retreat and study center devoted to reconciliation and peace in Ulster. Broad Street Church has made a modest commitment to Corrymeela as well. The letter, from the Director, ~~R. R.~~ Ray Davey, was full of information about the seminars held recently, the ~~final~~ financial condition of the project. The final paragraph however told the story of a Roman Catholic mother whose son ~~was~~ has been killed in the "troubles". "Aine

apologized for her red eyes, she had not expected any caller. 'I was just having a wee weep in the kitchen.' she said. 'Mostly now I'm alright, but sometimes it comes over me round this time - when he'd be coming in to his supper with his dad. They worked together at the plumbing, see, and you know how a young lad loves his food - he'd say "Great, Mum, it's onions tonight and you've been cryin'." People say I'll forget all them details, but sure how could I? It was in Corrymeela, Protestant and Catholic we were, all together and the Protestants knew it was their lot that killed my son, and they prayed special for me and it worked. I'll never be happy again, see, but I'm not angry no more.'"

Jesus said, 'What is the kingdom of God like? What shall I compare it with? It is like a mustard-seed which a man took and sowed in his garden; and it grew to be a tree and the birds came to roost among its branches.' Again he said, 'The kingdom of God, what shall I compare it with? It is like yeast which a woman took and mixed with half a hundredweight of flour till it was all leavened.'"

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Jesus of Nazareth was making a simple but astounding claim. He was saying that the Kingdom of God was, in fact, present right in the life of the world: that God's reign had begun to take effect: that it was an established fact - although somewhat hidden: the Kingdom of God was coming - ~~that it was still in process - the Kingdom, while present, was still in the future.~~

* Professor Hans Küng, highly respected Christian theologian, has written: 'Jesus' message was never as complicated as our catechisms and certainly far less complicated than our theological textbooks. He proclaimed in metaphors and parables the coming Kingdom of God: that God's cause will prevail: that the future belongs to God.' [Signposts for the Future p 13-14]

That's a deceptively simple message. For hundreds and hundreds of years Israel thought she knew what it meant. The Kingdom of God would come on the heels of a dramatic military revolution. A new David would sit on a Jerusalem throne. Israel, frankly, wasn't terribly impressed with Jesus of Nazareth and his odd announcement. He was thrown out of the Synagogue in his home town, his own family thought he was crazy, important people ignored him mostly. And so it was inevitable that his disciples, one day, when he said - ("The Kingdom of God is among you") asked ("Oh yeh? Where? Would you mind pointing it out to us, Jesus? After all, we've got a lot on the line - we walked away from our jobs and families to follow you. We'd like to see just a little bit of this kingdom you keep talking about.")

So he told two little stories about a grain of mustard seed growing into a tree, and about a bit of leaven inserted into flour. The most evident characteristic of a mustard seed is its smallness: of leaven - its silence and invisibility. A mustard seed is so small you can barely see it. When leaven is doing its work in bread baking you can't hear it or see it. "That," he said, "is what the kingdom I'm talking about is like."

We are victims of bigness, power, noise, speed, drama; the world has always been enamored with size and sound. The same is true of us, only more so. A Columbus television commercial smashes [redacted] windshields and prices, our music [redacted], assaults the ear drums: aesthetically the person of the year is superman, ("faster than a speeding bullet!") - and when

Goodness is success, and success is bigness, and power is

we look at the Christian enterprise we don't know what to make of what we see. The trends aren't looking very good. Sales are off, frankly; statistics are down. No one is seriously talking about the world for Christ in our generation any longer. We simply hope we're still around at the turn of the century.

The world never did understand him - or this about him. He was never talking about the World Wide Empire of Jesus of Nazareth. He didn't want to be King, or Pope or even Moderator. He wasn't interested.

At his birth, no one noticed much. The Scottish Poet George MacDonald wrote:

> "They were all looking for a king
> To slay their foes and lift them high;
> Thou cam'st, a little baby thing
> That made a woman cry."

At his death, the crowd quickly left the few morbidly curious to taunt and jeer. But it was a very quiet dying.

The ~~two~~ events which we decorate most lavishly - with sparkling trees and gold crosses and gorgeous flowers - were embarrassingly small and silent and almost invisible.

And this Sacrament, this common meal which is our dearest rite - in which we affirm the Kingdom of God even in our midst - ~~even around our tables~~ - is no more dramatic than a loaf and a cup.

The Kingdom of God - God's reign - is in our midst, he said. Watch for it. Celebrate it. Join it, when you are privileged to see it. Embrace it, shed a tear of joy - or laugh -

It is present when children are free not to learn our adult bigotry: when youngsters learn to forgive: when an Aussie Ethiopian shares a Zairian's faith, when Irish Catholic

or shout - or break bread and drink wine.

For the kingdom of this world has become the Kingdom of our Lord and of His Christ, and He shall reign forever and ever.

Eternal God, our father, we too, have asked about the location of your kingdom. Help us to see and know it as it comes silently into our lives. Give us grace to join it as it emerges, slowly - surely - in our world. This morning, grant us, as we commune, to know your nearness. In Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.